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Forum outlines plans for health care reform

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More than 46 million Americans are uninsured and many more pay for health plans that do not adequately cover their needs, according to a recent Census Bureau study.

Chippewa Valley community members learned about three proposals Thursday night that seek to reduce or eliminate the number of Wisconsin citizens without health insurance. The forum was sponsored by the Eau Claire Health Care Coalition, a group of local agencies and residents pushing for comprehensive health care reform in Wisconsin.

During a two-hour session, 22 attendees learned the nuts and bolts of three proposals introduced in the state legislature this year: the Wisconsin Health Plan, the **Wisconsin Health Care Partnership Plan**, and the Wisconsin Health Security Act. Although the plans differ in terms of coverage and costs, the night's presenters agreed that any option would expand and improve health care coverage in the state.

"There are things out there that every responsible legislator and every voter needs to pay attention to," said Dr. Gene Farley, a member of the Coalition for Wisconsin Health, who started the meeting by presenting the rationale behind the reform movement.

Administrative expenses account for 31 percent of all health care costs in the U.S., he said, adding that CEO salaries in the medical field also have increased the financial burden placed on patients.

But unlike other expenditures, health care is not a service people can afford to avoid, Farley said. Those who do often end up facing serious medical consequences, including death, he said.

"Health care is something that we all may need but we cannot provide for ourselves, like roads, education or fire protection," said Dr. Linda Farley, another member of the Coalition for Wisconsin Health who presented the Wisconsin Health Security Act. Other speakers included Wisconsin Health Project representative Lisa Ellinger, who covered the Wisconsin Health Plan, and **Robert Kraig, policy director for the Institute for One Wisconsin, who addressed the Wisconsin Health Care Partnership Plan.**

Forum organizer Tom Ahrens said the Eau Claire for Health Care Coalition endorsed all the plans, which seek to cut costs by streamlining the medical system.

Ahrens, western Wisconsin coalition director with Citizen Action of Wisconsin, called the meeting a "voter-education event."

"We think that people ought to understand what health care options are out there so they can ask their candidates intelligent questions," he said. "More and more people are becoming uninsured ... People are kind of fed up with the system."

Attendee Maria Henly said health care, like K-12 education, should be available to everyone.

"I think it's the most important issue out there right now for our community," said the Eau Claire woman, who said she was disappointed by the evening's turnout.

Henly said she would support any reforms made to state's health care system.

"I have health insurance, but I know a lot of people that don't," she said. "It's something they think about all the time."

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